

Aviation Engineers in the Southwest Pacific, WWII

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The Army recognized the importance of aviation engineers shortly before the United States entered World War II. The first unit—the 21st Engineer Regiment (Aviation) was activated June 1940 at Fort Benning, GA.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941, the engineer aviation battalions contributed greatly to America's success in the Pacific. Charged with the mission of building air bases in remote, undeveloped islands and tropical jungles, these battalions played prominent roles in the Pacific theater of operations.

The 804th from Hawaii and the 805th from Panama participated in ADM Chester Nimitz's Central Pacific offensive and built air bases for the B-29 heavy bomber units.

The 803d was captured in the Philippines when Bataan fell—but not before the battalion built 12 air bases on Luzon, moved and emplaced heavy guns for the defense of Bataan, built rice mills, and repaired roads and bridges. In the final days, the battalion fought as infantry in the front line.

The 802d remained in Alaska for the Aleutian campaign.

The 808th Engineer Aviation Battalion—activated in September 1941, March Field, CA—had little time to prepare for war. The commander, MAJ Elvin R. Heiberg, held the first formation on Saturday morning, 6 December 1941. Not knowing the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor the next day, he told his men how fortunate they were to have such fine barracks and living conditions.

Alerted for tropical foreign service, the battalion sailed from San Francisco and arrived in Melbourne, Australia on 2 February 1942.

The battalion moved to the Northern Territory to build air bases around Darwin. Over 2,000 miles from the closest American depot, the 808th began operations with only



Engineers construct an airfield in the South Pacific.

three dump trucks and two tractors. The first mail was a month late, and February pay was delayed. However, local bread and beef were plentiful; and any spare time could be spent panning for gold.

From February to July, the battalion built seven air bases in the Darwin area and developed a unique method of clearing the sites by stretching a cable between two tractors and moving back and forth across the field uprooting trees.

In keeping with GEN Douglas MacArthur's strategy of confronting the Japanese in the forward area rather than waiting to be attacked, the 808th moved from Australia to Port Moresby, Papua, New Guinea, in July 1942.

For the first time, the battalion encountered the difficulties of operating in an unfriendly, jungle environment: hordes of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, jungle rot, leeches, flying foxes, heavy rain and Japanese air raids. Yet, the 808th built an air base in one month and—between August 1942 and March 1943—completed four sites in the vicinity of Port Moresby.

These and other bases provided air support to stop the Japanese attack along the Kokoda Trail, aided MacArthur's attack on Buna, and destroyed an entire Japanese convoy in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea.

The 808th continued to operate in the Southwest Pacific area. At Finschhafen, New Guinea—in what the battalion considered its greatest accomplishment—the 808th hacked an air base out of the middle of the jungle in six weeks.

On Leyte, in the Philippines, the 808th started construction of the Dulag air base one day after the area was cleared of Japanese. The field was ready two days later for emergency use by Navy planes during the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

Forty-four months after leaving San Francisco, the 808th sailed into Yokohama Harbor as part of the American occupational forces in Japan.

The battalion—that had so little time to prepare for war—contributed greatly to America's success. Among the first US Army troops to reach Australia in early 1942, the 808th Aviation Engineer Battalion helped build the long Pacific trail that eventually led to victory.

Suggestions for further reading:
George E. White, Jr., "From Pearl Harbor to Tokyo," *The Military Engineer* 38 (January 1946): 1-8.
HQ Army Forces, Pacific, Office of the Chief Engineer, *Engineers of the Southwest Pacific 1941-1945*, Volume VI: *Airfields and Base Development*.